

# From My Days of University College / Since The 1940' s

*Bhikkhu Professor Dhammavihari*

It was more than fifty years ago. There were no universities and no vice-chancellors then in Ceylon. Do you remember a country by that name in Asia far back in history, a country where multi-ethnicity and multi-religious co-existence were more the rule than the exception. We had lived well the years of our teenage life. People had reason to be happy with everybody else. We loved being in a country like that. Fermentation, whether ethnic, religious or political, if there was any at all, was correctably at its lowest at the time. A devastating World War II had not even been sighted on the horizon.

Something like a hundred or more of us entered the University College in 1941 without any aggressive competition. I must confess that with my advancing age and a proportionately diminishing need to remember details, I might err with regard to dates and numbers. Please forgive. Encased between the Thurstan Road and the Reid Avenue, the Campus was small enough to harmoniously bring together the diverse groups of students working in different fields of humanities and sciences. The teachers then were not professional rivals. The classes were small enough for our teachers to know each one of us with adequate background information. They were for us, well and truly, *in loco parentis*.

Amongst those who enrolled with us for higher education then were several who later turned out to be eminent men in their own fields: N.T.D. Kanakeratne, Percy Colin Thome, Sam Wijesinghe, Tarzie Vittacchi and the like. We had lovable teachers too, lovable indeed, no matter to which departments of studies they belonged. There was Gunapala Malalasekera who, at the very beginning, taught us all three languages of Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit and taught everybody

else as well every thing that was beautiful in world culture, both of the east and the west. Lyn Ludowyke taught us many things from the English language and English literature which are worth remembering up to this day. They nurtured us very well in our extra-curricular activities, music, drama etc. both within and without the class-room. These are only a few among the many stalwarts who inspired us within the portals of the old University College.

The year 1942 witnessed the arrival of Sir Ivor Jennings from Trinity College, Cambridge. His arrival in the island opens out the first pages of the Book of Genesis for university education in our country. Undoubtedly, the blueprint he brought for us had the true impress of what residential universities of Cambridge and Oxford had been in his own native land. What traditions, healthy or not-so-healthy, were generated in the hearts and heads of our young men and women, is a question still to be studied and judgements pronounced. Jennings alone may not be held responsible for them. Did we offer anything in the alternative?

With Sir Ivor presiding, a University of Ceylon was born, with a fair range of Faculties and Departments of Studies within them, initially Arts, Oriental Studies, Science and Medicine. Unfortunately, a healthy combination of humanities and science studies at university level was not envisaged then. We think it is even more unfortunate, that even after more than fifty years of university education in the land, no local educationist has ever come forward to effect this much desired and much more lauded concept of inter-disciplinary studies. We know how well it is in vogue elsewhere, U.S.A. and Canada for instance. I have myself seen it in operation marvelously well at the University of Toronto in Canada while I enjoyed a teaching assignment there from 1969 to 1972.

Even with a World War II intervening during our student days from 1941 to 1945, our university life, non-residential on the whole, saw us living as students and as a student body with a considerable degree of communal harmony and inter-religious adoration. Inter-cultural admiration was at its peak. Women in the student community were held in high esteem. Student life was one of mutual cooperation and admiration. It is in such a salubrious climate that I had the good

fortune to grow up as an undergraduate, majoring in Sanskrit studies, and finishing up comfortably with a First Class, under my distinguished teacher, Professor O.H.de A.Wijesekera.

I never had an idea as to what the stars held out for me. Oracles and fortune-telling, I believe, were less patronized in academic circles then. Almost with the examination results getting out, I had the distinction of being invited by the Professor of Pali Studies, Professor Gunapala Malalasekera to join his Department as an assistant lecturer. Rejecting the chance of sitting for the C.C.S. I chose to be a university teacher. This I chose because of the need to learn more and more every day in order to be able to teach well more and more. Thanks to everybody who guided me in this direction, including Sir Ivor who backed me very much in this choice. It is this crucial decision, taken by myself at the young age of twenty-five, that has got me finally to where I am today, ending up as a Buddhist monk, on retiring from university service at the age of sixty-seven as the Director of the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies.

As I sit back now and look upon these seventy-eight years of my life, more than half of which were spent within university circles, I joyously feel they have given me a kaleidoscopic vision of life. It has been personally a process of being put through the mill. Both with my colleagues and my students, I have seen the emergence of men and women from dwarfs to giants. And perhaps even the reverse process. The rise and fall of humans in this society, the how and the why and wherefore. Every aspect of human character, from ambition and altruism to many other traits higher and lower, have been accurately mirrored, together with the consequences they bring in their wake. Even fame and glory crumbling to dust before our very eyes. In these situations, we have to learn, and learn with honesty, in the great university of life, and act and react with a keen sense of awareness and sound judgement.

Neither we nor our posterity should have to pay a disproportionate price for our mistakes.